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THE SECRET OF CHAUCER'S PARDONER

Apparent inconsistencies in Chaucer's portrayal of the Pardon have, up to this time, received no adequate explanation. Offering contemporary historical evidence, J. J. Jusserand arrives at the conclusion that in the presentation of this character "there is not the slightest exaggeration in Chaucer, that he knew well the Pardoners of his time, and described them exactly as they were, and that he did not add a word, not justified by what he saw, in order to win our laughter or to enliven his description."¹ Professor Tupper, in his theory of Chaucer's architectonic use of the Seven Deadly Sins *motif* in the composition of the *Canterbury Tales*, asserts in one place² that "the rascal is formally illustrating" the Sins of Gluttony and Avarice, in another,³ that he is "exemplifying only the vices of the tavern," and in still another,⁴ that he must be considered "a typical glutton or tavern-reveler." And Professor Kittredge, in his attempt to harmonize certain conflicting elements in both character and story, seeks a pleasant but unconvincing solution of the problem in the supposition that this "one lost soul among the Canterbury Pilgrims," acting for the most part from the basest of motives, suffers for a single moment from a "paroxysm of agonized sincerity."⁵ Still, in spite of these investigations, I cannot help feeling that the Pardon's character in its relation to his personal appearance, his impudent confession, and his unreasonable anger against the Host need further treatment.

Critics have heretofore given too little attention, I think, to the possible significance of those supposedly accidental items of

¹ Chaucer's Pardon and the Pope's Pardoners, J. J. Jusserand, *Essays on Chaucer*, 2nd Ser. No. 2, p. 423. Cf. also the same author's *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 210.

² Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins, F. Tupper, *Pub. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, Vol. 29, p. 115.

³ The Pardon's Tavern, F. Tupper, *Jour. Eng. and Germ. Philol.*, Vol. 13, p. 558. This theory was exploded by J. L. Lowes, *Pub. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, Vol. 30, pp. 260 ff.

⁴ *Jour. Eng. and Germ. Philol.*, Vol. 13, p. 565.

⁵ Cf. *Chaucer and his Poetry*, G. L. Kittredge, pp. 212 ff., and a fuller discussion by the same author in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 72, pp. 830 ff.

personal appearance which Chaucer is so fond of introducing, apparently at random, in the presentation of his characters. The Prioress, to be sure, with her blue eyes, her soft, red mouth, and broad forehead, is said to represent the conventional mediæval type of feminine beauty;⁶ Chaucer's pronouncement that the joined eyebrows of Creseyde constitutes a blemish is the result of an inherited literary taste;⁷ the Wife of Bath is "gat-tothed" because she is accustomed to travel much;⁸ and the Summoner's "fyr-reed cherubinnes face" indicates the too frequent indulgence in strong wines and ales.⁹ These are beginnings of investigations in the right direction. But to our modern minds the Pardoner's physical peculiarities are not vitally related to his immoral character; they may seem, after we have become acquainted with him, entirely appropriate and perhaps rather humorous, but not essential. He has long, straight hair as yellow as wax, which hangs thinly spread over his shoulders, each hair to itself; his eyes are wide open and glaring like those of a hare; his voice is high-pitched and as "thin" as that of a goat; he is entirely without any indication of a beard; and, if we may judge from the description which he gives of himself in the act of delivering one of his powerful sermons, his neck is long and thin:

Than peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
As doth a dowve sitting on a berne.¹⁰

What do these physical characteristics signify to the mediæval mind? It is not by chance that Chaucer, the artist, hits upon these particular items rather than upon others; nor does he by chance invest the Pardoner with them rather than the Reeve or the Summoner. Here, as usual, Chaucer knows what he is about. His selection of both form and feature given to all his characters is directly influenced, I believe, by that univer-

⁶ Cf. *The Middle English Ideal of Personal Beauty*, W. C. Curry, Jr., pp. 3, 51, 66, 42, etc.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48; J. Fürst, *Philologus*, Vol. LXI, p. 387; G. L. Hamilton, *Mod. Lang. Notes*, Vol. XX, p. 80; G. P. Krapp, *Mod. Lang. Notes*, Vol. XIX, p. 235.

⁸ Cf. Skeat's *Oxford Chaucer*, Vol. V, p. 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 56

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, C. T., C. 395.

sally popular, "scientific" class of literature known as the Physiognomies.¹¹ For Chaucer and for every educated man of his time this physiognomical lore made it possible to judge with accuracy the character of a man from a study of his features. According to certain well-known principles they might interpret every line of the face, every form and color of the eyes, and any tone of the voice. What, then, could be more natural than that Chaucer should go to the Physiognomies for suggestions as to the physical characteristics most appropriate for the men and women whom he wishes to present?

With this idea in mind, let us proceed to examine what the Physiognomies have to say regarding the Pardon's features in their relation to his character. Antonius Polemon Laodicensis,¹² the most famous of the ancient physiognomists and the founder of most of the "science" which appears in later authors, says of glaring eyes: *Oculi sursum stantes, fatuitatis . . . simulac gulosis et libidinis, ebrietatisque.*¹³ An early anonymous writer, whose work is based on that of Polemon, informs us that the signs of an impudent man are these: *oculis patentibus, lucidis, palpebris plurimum reseratis, . . . contra intuens, altius erigens . . . vocis acutae. huiusmodi impudens, injuriosus homo est.*¹⁴ The Middle English *Secreta Secretorum*, which was certainly known to Chaucer,¹⁵ also agrees that "The tokenys to know shames men: *Ryst opyn eighyn and glysinge . . .*",¹⁶ and adds the significant remark that "tho that haue the voyce hei, smale and swete and plesaunt, bene neshe,

¹¹ I am at present making a thoro study of the influence of the Physiognomies on medieval taste in the matter of personal beauty and ugliness. All of Chaucer's characters will come under this discussion.

¹² He was the famous rhetorician and historian who flourished under Trajan and Hadrian and who died about 144 A.D. For a full discussion of his life and influence, cf. R. Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomici*, Vol. I, pp. LXXIV ff.

¹³ Polemonis Physiognomon, in *Scriptores physiognomiae veteres*, ed. I. G. F. Franzius, 1780, p. 209.

¹⁴ Anonymi de Physiognomia liber Latinus, *Scrip. physiog.* Foerster, Vol. II, p. 121. The editor collates fifteen codices of this version. Cf. Vol. I, pp. CXLVI ff.

¹⁵ The Canon's Yeoman mentions it among certain other books of wisdom, *Cant. Tales*, G. 1447.

¹⁶ *Secreta Secretorum*, ed. R. Steele, EETS. E.S., 74, p. 223/18. The editor knows forty other MSS. in the British Museum.

and haue lytill of manhode, and i-likenyd to women."¹⁷ Here, exactly as in Chaucer, we find that the high, thin voice and glaring eyes are directly associated with shameless impudence, gluttony, and reveling. Long, stringy yellow hair, like the thin voice, indicates impotence and lack of manhood: Capilli molles et ultra modum tenues rubei et rari penuriam sanguinis, ener- vem, sine virtute ac femininum animum et quanto rariores fuerint, tanto magis subdolum.¹⁸ Of the long, slim neck Go- clenio says: Collum longum & gracile, garrulos, superbos, & malorum morum;¹⁹ and concerning the complete absence of beard he affirms: Virum natura imberbem mulierosis moribus dolosis praeditum, & quandoque impotentem in Venere dicit. Subinde tamen singulare ac rarum ingenium prodit. Exempla sunt in promptu.²⁰ The Pardoner is an example. That he is an abandoned rascal delighting in hypocrisy and possessed of a colossal impudence, no one can doubt after hearing his shameless confession and witnessing his attempt to hypnotize the Host; that he is a glutton and a typical tavern reveler is revealed by the fact that he calls for cakes and ale before he can properly relate a "moral tale;" that he is a man of no mean ingenuity and of considerable cleverness is proclaimed by the amount of his yearly income from the practice of chicanery and fraud; and that his lack of beard and his goat-like voice indicate impotence, or at least effeminacy, Chaucer plainly affirms,

A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot;
No berd hadde he, ne never sholde have,
As smothe it was as it were late y-shave;
I trowe he were a gelding or a mare.²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231/8.

¹⁸ *Scrip. physiog.*, Foerster, II, p. 22. Rudolpho Goclenio agrees in substance (*Physiognomica et Chiromantica Specialia*, Hamburgi, 1661, p. 35), and adds regarding the color: Valde vero flavi et albantes rudelatem, magnitatem et rusticitatem notant, p. 37. He states further: Sed valdi ruffi insipientiam, iracundiam et insidias; imprudentiam et animi malignitatem indicant, etc., p. 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84. (But for a contrary opinion cf. Admantius, in *Scrip. physiog. vet.*, Franzius, pp. 259, 391).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²¹ Skeat, C. T., A. 688 ff. In most editions of Chaucer the first line of this quotation is followed by a period as tho it were an isolated fragment of information incidentally introduced. Cf. Skeat, *Oxford Chaucer*; Liddell, *Chaucer*;

Chaucer himself indicates in this passage the secret of the Pardon; he is most unfortunate in his birth. He carries upon his body and has stamped upon his mind and character the marks of what is well known to the medieval physiognomists as a *eunuchus ex nativitate*. The Sophist Admantius (*ca.* the middle of the fourth century)²² devotes one whole section to eunuchs of this type: Qui ex naturae vitio sunt eunuchi; mala signa habent ceu prae aliis hominibus, vt plurimum enim sunt crudeles, insidiosi, malefici, tamen alii magis prae aliis.²³ The Greek version of Polemon gives a like account, but draws a sharp distinction between the *eunuchus ex nativitate* and the *eunuchus qui castratus est*. He says: Eunuchis prauae procreationis, eadem sunt signa, quae aliis competit hominibus; ac vt plurimum sunt eiusdem mentis, insidiosi, malefici. Alii vero et aliorum dolorum sunt operarii. Qui vero in honore constitutus est eunuchus in uno differt, simul enim conatu audaci instigatur, et plus ingenuae naturae habet, et tanquam non robustus in eodem permanet.²⁴ Rasis, an eminent Arabian physician of the tenth century,²⁵ adds a few details concerning physical appearance: Eunuchus malorum est morum. est enim stultus et cupidus et praesumptuosus. Qui autem castratus non fuit, sed sine testiculis natus vel parvissimos habens eunuchus appetit, cui videlicet barba nunquam nascitur,²⁶ deterior est.²⁷ The anonymous author mentioned above, discussing the

Carpenter, *Prologue* etc. Reference to the Physiognomies, however, shows that it bears a logical relation to the last line just as does the information concerning the beard.

²² *Scrip. physiog.*, Foerster, Vol. I, CIIff.

²³ Admantii Sophistae Physiognomonicon (Gr.) trans. by Franzius, *Scrip. physiog. vet.*, p. 376. An additional Greek version may be found in *Scrip. physiog.*, Foerster, Vol. I, pp. 294 ff.

²⁴ Polemonis Physiognomonicon (Gr.), trans. Franzius, *Scrip. physiog. vet.*, p. 308.

²⁵ Razi (Mohammed Abou-Bekr Ibn-Zacaria), born at Rey (Ragès), and died 923. Cf. *Biographie Universelle*, Michaud.

²⁶ Baptista Porta, referring to Polemon, has this to say in addition regarding men without beard: Imberbis viri mulieribus & spadonis similes existunt. Ait Polemon, spadones naturali nequitia pessimis esse moribus, ingenio immites, dolosos, facinorosos, aliisque sceleribus se immiscentes. *De Humana Physiognomonia*, Hanoviae, 1593, p. 261.

²⁷ Rasis Physiognomiae versio Latina a Gerardo Cremonensi facta, *Scrip. physiog.*, Foerster, Vol. II, p. 178.

significance of wide-open, glaring eyes, says further: Oculi late patentes micantes leniter intendentes tanquam concinnati ad suavitatem et gratiam . . . congruunt . . . a Polemone qui-dem auctore referuntur, qui eunuchum sui temporis fuisse hunc hominem descriptis . . . huic cetera corporis indicia huiusmodi assignat; tensam frontem . . . cervicem tenuem . . . vocis femineam, verba muliebria. . . hunc dicit impatientia libidinum quae passus est, praeterea maledicum, temerarium, sed et maleficiis studentem, nam et letiferum venenum dicebatur clanculo venditare.²⁸ From these quotations it appears that the physical marks of a *eunuchus ex nativitate* are, like those of the Pardoner, wide-open glittering eyes, a long neck, a high-pitched voice, and a beardless chin. The mind which accompanies this physical misfortune is, like that of the Pardoner, full of deceit, arrogant, sensual and lustful, dissolute, avaricious, and studious of all kinds of depravity.

Explanations of such physical phenomena are not lacking. Bartholomew Anglicus, speaking of the hair, remarks: "Also gelded men are not balde, & that is for chaungyne of theyr complexyon, & for maystery of colde, & closith & stoppth ye poores of skyne of ye heed & holdyth togideres ye fumosite yt it maye not passe & be wasted. But in wymen & in gelded men other heer fallyth & faylyth."²⁹ He is also perfectly familiar with the reason for the "acute" voice: "Males haue stronger synewes & stringes than chyldren, & vngelded haue stronger than gelded. And for febylnes & synewes ye voys of theum yt ben gelded is lyke ye voys of females."³⁰ Nor is he at a loss for an explanation of the growth of beard. "And therfore," he continues, "the berde is nedefull helpynge for chekes and token of vertu & strengthe of kendely heet. And herfore a man hath

²⁸ Anonymi de physiognomia liber Latinus, *Scrip. physiog.*, Foerster, Vol. II, p. 58.

²⁹ *Bartholomeus de Proprietatibus Rerum*, trans. Trevisa, printed by Wynkyn de Worde, 1495, Lib. V, Cap. LXVI. Cf. also a like account in Porta, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 372.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, De Voce, Lib. V, Cap. XXIII, Cap. XLIX. Compare Porta's fuller explanation, *op. cit.*, p. 245. Porta's work is illuminating. He seems to have made a complete digest of opinion upon all points physiognomical from Aristotle down to his own time. He is a typical example of the medieval "scholar," reproducing with accuracy what Poiemon, Admantius, and Rasis have said, but never adding anything of his own.

a berde & not a woman; for a man is kyndly more hote than a woman. And therfore in a man ye smoke that is matere of heer encreasyth more than in a woman. And for kynde suffiseth not to waste that smoke, he puttith and dryueth it out by two places, in the heed and in the berde. And therfore somtyme wymen hote and moyste of complexyon haue berdes. And in lyke wyse men of colde and drye complexyon haue lytyll berdes, and therefore in men yt ben gelded growe noo berdes. For they haue loste the hote membre that sholde brede the hote humour & smoke the matere of heer.³¹ Surely Bartholomew knows his Physiognomy! And whatever may be said as to Chaucer's knowledge of physiognomy, certain it is that he is perfectly at home in the medical science of his time. His Pardon is scientifically correct.

Most of the authors cited above, it will be observed, give Polemon as the authority upon the subject of eunuchs. It may be well, therefore, to present here in full the original sketch from which later writers evidently drew their material. Polemon pretends to be describing a celebrated eunuch of his own time, whose name, he affirms, he does not know. One anonymous author remarks, however, that "intelligitur autem de Favorino eum dicere."³² That being the case, this may be Favorinus of Arles—a contemporary and political opponent of Polemon—whose infirmity is ridiculed in Lucian's *Eunuchus* and whose life is touched upon by Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists*.³³ The whole passage³⁴ as it appears in the Arabic and Latin version of Polemon is as follows:

Ubi oculus apertus est habetque coruscationem qualem marmor habet,
acie acuta, parum pudicitiae indicat. Haec autem est natura quae in oculis
virorum exstat qui ceteris viris similes non sunt, ut eunuchus qui tamen non
castratus est, sed sine testiculis natus. Nescio autem an huius generis virum
invenerim praeter unum . . . Libidinosus et dissolutus supra omnem modum
erat; nam oculi eius e pessimorum hominum genere, nimirum illi descriptioni
similes erant . . . Praeditus erat inflata fronte . . . cervix longa tenuis
. . . Clamor eius mulieris clamor aequiparabat . . . Magnam sui ipsius

³¹ *Op. cit.*, De Barba, Lib. V, Cap. XV.

³² *Scrip. physiog.* Foerster, Vol. II, p. 58.

³³ Cf. *Biographie Universelle*, Michaud. Favorinus was still alive in the year 155 A.D., *Scrip. physiog.*, Vol. I, LXXX ff.

³⁴ Polemonis de physiognomia liber Arabice et Latine, ed G. Hoffmann in *Scrip. physiog.*, Foerster, Vol. I, pp. 160-4.

curam habebat crines (alendo) abundantes et corpori infricando medicamenta, denique quamvis rem (colendo) quae libidinis et coitus desiderium excitat. Vox eius mulierum voci similis fuit . . . Forma tali praeditus ioco utebatur ludibrioso et quidquid animo volvebat facere solebat. Lingua Graecam et eius loquela edocutus hac maxime uti solebat . . . Urbes et fora circumibat homines congregans ut malum ostenderet et iniuriam quaereret. Insuper incantator astutissimus erat et praestigias profitebatur, hominibus praedicans se vivos et mortuos; qua re homines adeo inducebat ut multae mulierum et virorum turbae eum adirent. Viris autem persuadebat se posse feminas cogere ut ad eos venirent nec minus ut viri ad feminas; quae dum ex occulto proloquebatur confirmabat. Summus in male faciendo doctor erat, letiferorum venenorum species colligebat. Ac totius eius ingenii summa in aliqua harum rerum posita erat . . . Ubi igitur oculos initio huius disputationis a me descriptos videris, eorum possessorem eunuchorum similem repieres.

Analysis of this particular passage reveals a marked similarity in the characters, modes of thought, and bodily characteristics of Favorinus and Chaucer's Pardoner. Indeed the parallelism is so close that it may well seem as if Chaucer must have had this particular account, or perhaps one of the widespread anonymous versions of it, before him as he wrote. The eyes of Favorinus are wide-open and shining or glittering like marble, his neck is long and thin, his voice like that of a woman, and he takes great pride in his abundantly long hair to which, as to his whole body, he makes frequent applications of ointments; the eyes of the Pardoner are glaring like those of a hare, he stretches forth his thin neck like a dove on a barn, and he is so inordinately proud of his long, perfectly straight hair—probably greased to make it hand smooth—that he prefers simply a cap to the regular hood of his profession.³⁵ Favorinus is, moreover, sensual, lustful, and dissolute above all measure; the Pardoner is lecherous—at least in thought and imagination—and a typical tavern reveler.³⁶ The former speaks Greek in his public harangues; the latter “saffrons” his “predicaciouns” with Latin in order to stir men to devotion.³⁷ Both rascals possess a remarkable knowledge of mob-psychology: crowds of men and women throng the forums and public places where Favorinus pursues his nefarious practices; thousands of innocent people flock to hear the Pardoner's sermons and to behold his marvelous relics of saints. The Sophist is a most astute

³⁵ Cf. C. T., A. 675.

³⁶ C. T., C. 452.

³⁷ C. T., C. 345 ff.

magician who, professing to have received his power from the occult world, proclaims an uncanny knowledge of, and control over the mysteries of life and death; a self-announced sorcerer who, with evil mind and polluted imagination, affirms his ability to force women to men even as men now seek women. The Pardoner is a shameless and impudent fraud who, bringing his pardons and bulls all hot from the supreme spiritual authority at Rome, claims to exercise power of life and death over the human soul; a colossal cynic who, cursed with a concupiscent mind and armed with false relics, offers to men a certain cure for jealousy—even tho their wives are strumpets—and to women an easy absolution from the horrible sin of infidelity to their husbands.³⁸ Both spit out venom under the hue of honesty or holiness;³⁹ both alike, urged on by an inordinate avarice and cupidity, reap a golden harvest from their practices of villainy and fraud.⁴⁰ Their minds not less than their bodies belong to the same type; their actions spring from like impulses; their purposes are formed and executed in a similar manner. Only their fields of activity are different.⁴¹ To Chaucer belongs great honor for having combined in the person and the tale of his Pardoner a complete psychological study of the medieval *eunuchus ex nativitate* and a mordant satire on the abuses practiced in the church of his day.⁴²

Considered in the light of the material presented in this investigation, certain problems which seem to have baffled the critics become straightway clear. After the Doctor has completed his pathetic account of Virginia, it will be remembered, the tender-hearted Host is so overcome with pity for the maid that he must have a drink or must listen to a merry tale to ease his pain of heart. He demands "som mirthe or japes" from the Pardoner, who appears quite willing to accommodate him.

³⁸ C. T., C. 365, 380.

³⁹ C. T., C. 420 ff.

⁴⁰ C. T., C. 388 ff., 445 ff.

⁴¹ My theory, therefore, in no way vitiates the sound conclusions drawn by Jusserand in his article cited above.

⁴² For a discussion of Chaucer's probable purpose in this satire, cf. *The Pardon's Prologue and Tale*, a critical edition, J. Koch, p. XXX.

Instantly, and unexpectedly, a protest comes from the people of high rank:

Nay! lat him telle us of no ribaudye;
Tel us som moral thing, that we may lere
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly here.⁴³

Why should the “gentils” suppose that when the Host calls for a “merry tale”, the Pardoner will relate a filthy or obscene story? Professor Kittredge is of the opinion that “what the Host wants is a ribald story,” and that the gentlefolk are justified, by their association with the noble “ecclesiaste” who is on his vacation, in expecting it.⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, however, neither a “merry tale” nor a “jape” is necessarily synonymous with a ribald story in Chaucer. Sir Thopas is a “tale of mirthe;”⁴⁵ the extravaganza of Chantecleer and Pertelote is called a “mery tale;”⁴⁶ and the Host’s little pleasantry regarding Chaucer’s shapely figure is a “jape.”⁴⁷ Nor is there any positive evidence which would indicate that the Pilgrims of high rank have had during the journey any close association whatever with the Pardoner. He has remained completely in the background up to this time. But now when he comes forward with alacrity at the call of the Host and speaks of seeking inspiration for his story in a near-by tavern, the gentlefolk, who are doubtless well acquainted with the current physiognomical lore,⁴⁸ recognize the type immediately. They instantly translate his physical peculiarities into terms of character. What only could be expected from a *eunuchus ex nativitate?* “Nay!” they cry, “let him tell us no ribald story.”

The Pardoner’s character having been given, however, Professor Kittredge’s exposition⁴⁹ of the dramatic fitness of his cynical confession and excellent tale is admirable. But that the reprobate, near the end of his sermon, is so overcome by the power of his own eloquence that he is betrayed into a moment of sincerity, is unbelievable. “The Pardoner,” says Professor

⁴³ C. T., C. 324 ff.

⁴⁴ *Chaucer and his Poetry*, pp. 212, 211; *Atlantic*, Vol. 72, pp. 831 ff.

⁴⁵ C. T., B. 1896.

⁴⁶ C. T., B. 4639.

⁴⁷ C. T., B. 1890.

⁴⁸ Cf. Steele’s Introduction to *Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, EETS. E. S. 66.

⁴⁹ *Atlantic*, Vol. 72, pp. 830 ff; *Ch. and his Poetry*, pp. 214 ff.

Kittredge, "has not always been an assassin of souls. He is a renegade, perhaps, from some holy order. Once he preached for Christ's sake; and now, under the spell of the wonderful story he has told and of recollections that stir within him, he suffers a very paroxysm of agonized sincerity."⁵⁰ But it can last for only a moment. Regaining his wonted impudence after the unexpected "emotional crisis," he offers his pardons and relics for sale to the Pilgrims themselves, suggesting that the Host be the first to come forward. Harry Baily, not understanding the rascal's "moral convulsion," answers with a "rough jocularity" which precipitates the furious anger of the rebuffed Pardoner. It is a beautiful theory. We should like to believe that even this "lost soul" may be touched by the beautiful and the tragic.

But unfortunately, knowing his secret as we now do, we are forced to a different interpretation of his concluding remark,

. . . and, lo, sirs, thus I preche.
And Jesu Crist, that is our soules leche,
So graunte yow his pardon to receyve,
For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve.⁵¹

We see in this only a preparation for his proposed master-stroke of deception. He has already revealed with amazing frankness the fraud which he is accustomed to practice upon his hearers; he has illustrated with eloquence and dramatic power the manner in which results are obtained in his profession. He is evidently proud of his skill. To hypnotize the Pilgrims into buying worthless relics after he has declared his own perfidy, would constitute the crowning success of his career. Turning suddenly to them he says, in effect: "Lo, sirs, this is the way I preach to *ignorant* people. But *you* are my friends; may God grant that *you* may receive the pardon of Jesus Christ; I would never deceive *you*! Come, now, and kiss this relic." But he reckons without his Host! That he should be taken for a fool somewhat angers the estimable inn-keeper, who replies in his momentary heat with a direct reference to the Pardoner's infirmity,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 217; *Atlantic*, Vol. 72, p. 833.

⁵¹ C. T., C. 915.

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stede of relikes or of seintuarie.

It is no wonder that the Pardoner begins to redden at this unmannerly probing of his secret and that he should be speechless with rage when the Host continues with withering sarcasm and scorn,

Lat cutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie.⁵²

When we remember that the Pardoner is physically unfortunate, “natus sine testiculis vel parvissimos habens,” this rude speech of the Host seems to be something more than “rough jocularity.” As the Flemings say, “Sooth pley, quaad pley.” And to make matters worse the whole company laughs! The good-natured Host, however, soon realizes his mistake, declares he will not “play” with an angry man, and at the request of the Knight consents to make peace with a kiss. The incident is closed.

That the Pardoner is extremely sensitive upon the matter of his weakness is evidenced by his pathetic attempts to conceal it. He goes about singing in concert with the Summoner a gay little song “Come hider, love, to me,”⁵³ and boasts with brazen affrontry that he will drink good wine “And have a joly wenche in every toun.”⁵⁴ He sings and brags like a real man; but one suspects that most of his *affaires d'amour* result in chagrin and disappointment like that in which he engages with Kitt the Tapster in the *Tale of Beryn*,⁵⁵ and that many of his potations of wine and ale are taken to arouse an atrophied desire. He is almost as pitiable a figure as the aged January, who sits up late on the first night of his marriage with May, drinking strong wines hot with spices “t'encresen his corage.”⁵⁶ Being feeble in body—tho not necessarily entirely impotent—he permits his polluted imagination to revel in thoughts of lust and fleshly

⁵² C. T., C. 951 ff.

⁵³ C. T., A. 672.

⁵⁴ C. T., C. 453.

⁵⁵ *The Tale of Beryn*, ed. Furnivall and Stone, EETS. E. S. 105. It is significant, I think, that in the Prologue to this pseudo-Chaucerian story the Pardoner appears in his true colors. Recognizing his weakness, the Tapster upon seeing him for the first time determines to make him her dupe. He is perfectly harmless, and she knows it. She leads him on, permits him to come into compromising positions with her, but finally hands him over to shameful treatment at the hands of her paramour. That he is a eunuch and therefore a fit butt for an ale-house joke, gives point to her treatment.

⁵⁶ C. T., E. 1807 ff.

delights. The physical stamina of the Wife of Bath has his unbounded admiration. Her eloquent sermon against virginity and in favor of the proper use of God-given powers of body for the promotion of carnal pleasure,⁵⁷ meets with his enthusiastic approval. He even interrupts her steady flow of language to applaud:

‘Now dame’, quod he, ‘by god and by seint John,
Ye been a noble prehour in this cas!’⁵⁸

There is one part of her discourse, however, which strikes him with panic. Being naturally of a passionate disposition, she affirms that her husband will always be her slave and thrall. He shall pay his debts, sanctioned by the Apostle, both morning and evening. As long as she shall be his wife, he must have tribulation of the flesh and must make his body subject in love to her desire.⁵⁹ This is too much for the Pardonner. If this is the proper relation between husband and wife, he has just escaped being plunged into a most horrible situation;

I was about to wedde a wyf; alas!
What sholde I bye it on my flesh so dere?
Yet hadde I never wedde no wyf to-yere!⁶⁰

At this unexpected interruption the Pilgrims do not even smile. Perhaps they remember his former anger and are content to let him play his little farce in peace. At any rate, this is the Pardonner’s last boast. In it may be plainly seen his painful consciousness of physical incompleteness and perhaps a bit of wistful sadness because of his misfortune.⁶¹

If this interpretation of the Pardonner’s character is true—and I can see no valid reason to the contrary—he is to be pitied rather than censured. Born a eunuch and in consequence provided by nature with a warped mind and soul, he is compelled to follow the lead of his unholy impulses into debauchery, vice, and crime. Being an outcast from human society, he satisfies

⁵⁷ C. T., D. 95–150.

⁵⁸ C. T., D. 164.

⁵⁹ C.T., D. 150–160.

⁶⁰ C.T., D. 166 ff.

⁶¹ For a different interpretation of this interruption cf. Ten Brink, *History of English Literature*, trans. Wm. C. Robinson, Vol. II, p. 161.

his depraved desires by preying upon it. His character is consistent thruout both with itself and with nature. And Chaucer, the artist and man of deep human sympathy, has shown by the infinite care with which he has developed the Pardoner's character that he is able to appreciate, without judging too harshly, the point of view of even a *eunuchus ex nativitate*.

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